

## A Moment in Time: Four Feminist Friends

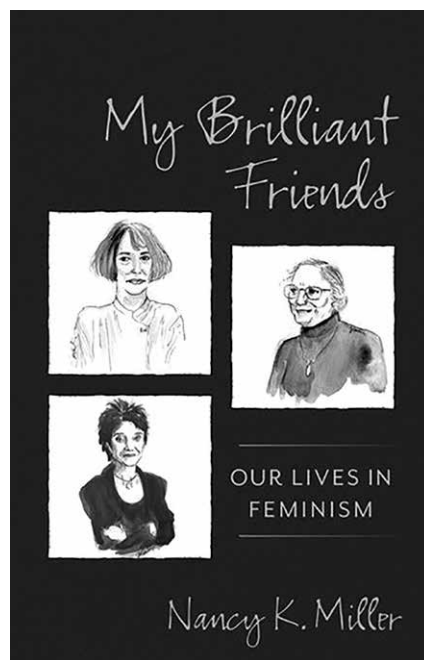
BY NANCY M. NYLAND

Nancy K. Miller, *My Brilliant Friends: Our Lives in Feminism*. Columbia University Press, 2019. (Gender and Culture series.) 232 pp. notes. \$28.00, ISBN 978-0231190541.

Nancy K. Miller's elegiac meditation on her most important friendships tells the story of four women who behaved as if, in the words of one of them, "a life outside of literature is not worth living" (p. 119). Miller and her friends are founding mothers of the field of feminist criticism. Their collective accomplishments and publications are too numerous to recount here, but highlights include these: Miller and Caroline Heilbrun cofounded and edited the Gender and Culture series at Columbia University Press, which published this volume; Naomi Schor's papers were the initial contribution that founded the Pembroke Center Feminist Theory Archive at Brown; and Dianne Westbrook was invited by Anne Sexton's daughter to write a biography of the poet that became a finalist for the National Book Award.

As a professor at Columbia who wrote analyses of both French and English literature, Miller is well aware of the body of work in the genre of memoir. She takes her title from the first of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, *My Brilliant Friend*. References to other memoirs appear throughout the text like touchstones, both by men writing about men's friendships and by women writing about their most intense connections with other women. The eventual loss of those friendships, whether through alienation or the ultimate separation, death, is described with unflinching honesty. The author writes as she and

her friends lived, "[i]n the spirit of feminist truth-telling" (p. 98). This is what makes their stories so compelling.



The quartet held privileged positions first as students and then as faculty at Columbia and other Ivy League schools. They resided on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and earned academic fellowships that allowed them time to write, sometimes while living in Paris. The other well-known writers and famous professors mentioned would sound like name dropping if they were not all very real characters in the author's life. Living among so much talent, more than one of the friends inevi-

tably became publicly enshrined for posterity as a character in some other writer's work, such as a story in the *New Yorker* or a friend's (or enemy's) novel. Even when the characterization was unflattering, the subject did not mind, as "the book was an artifact of literature — the ultimate prestige" (p. 129).

The prerequisites of successful academic careers did not necessarily translate to happiness. These women's friendships consisted of mutual support during lengthy bouts of depression and shared frustration over a lack of recognition by male peers. As pioneers breaking new ground with feminist theory, they encountered resistance within their academic departments. Because of the many connections with Columbia, the author acknowledges that "Columbia will be a character in our story, leading man and villain" (p. 10). At that time, "all the professors, except for one, were men" (p. 92), as reflected in the title of one of Heilbrun's many books, *When Men Were the Only Models We Had: My Teachers Fadimin, Barzun, Trilling* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

As a defense against "our violent little universe on the shores of the Hudson," (at least violent for women), the four friends banded together in one of the earliest consciousness-raising groups to discuss a central question: "Could a woman have sex, babies, and a career?" (p. 91). Perhaps the way they lived their

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lives answers the question. Three of the four married and had children, but forging a writing life as well as an academic career was never an easy path. They were decades ahead of the #MeToo movement, to which the author makes her contribution by describing how unremarkable it was for a certain male professor to attempt to kiss and fondle women whose dissertations he was advising while married to one of his former students.

In her spirit of feminist truth-telling, Miller acknowledges that envy was as much a part of these intense female friendships as admiration – not just envy of each other’s work, but also of their personal lives: relationships, appearance, style, and sometimes

even clothing, which they shared and swapped like sisters. Even such accomplished women felt they had to dress to gain the attention of their male professors or, later on, of potential donors to their institutions. Appearance was even more important when one was not paying attention to it, as eventually Carolyn Heilbrun no longer worried about her weight or wore dresses, declaring, “Aging set me free” (p. 10). The women who did take care with their appearance walked a fine line, whether as students or as professors. It was acceptable to be noticed as stylish, but not as too attractive, since this could prevent one from being taken seriously.

Miller recreates a moment in time through her analysis of the emotions in friendships so intense they were described by observers as being erotic, although not sexual. Her comparisons with other memoirs provide a gateway to the genre that could serve as a textbook while being much more engaging. *My Brilliant Friends* will be valuable to students of literary criticism and feminism as well as history and even psychology. It is such a specific evocation of a particular time and place, and it simultaneously engages the emotions in its reflection on love and loss.

[Nancy M. Nyland is a retired arts and humanities academic librarian.]



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